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Büchner and Real Presence: a Reading of the *Kunstgespräch* in *Lenz*

John Walker

Abstract. The passage known as the *Kunstgespräch* in *Lenz* is one of the best known in Büchner's work, and often read as both an anticipatory statement of the particular character of nineteenth-century German realism and one of the most remarkably "modern" of early nineteenth-century German narrative texts. In this chapter I pursue two theses about this famous passage and its sequel. First, that it exemplifies George Steiner's thesis in his book *Real Presences* that literature can be a manifestation of God's real presence in language and, second that it also manifests, when read in the context of Büchner's *Novelle* as a whole, what Steiner calls 'the break of the covenant between word and world' which he sees as characteristic of European modernism that began around 1870, about thirty-five years after Büchner's text was written. This divine covenant establishes the connection between *Logos* and word - what Steiner calls 'the saying of Being' - and can therefore be read in a theological context for which the idea of art as a mode of incarnation is meaningful. However, it also insistently reminds us of the difference between the theological and aesthetic modes of truth and should warn us against their critical identification. In particular, several moments in this text strongly suggest that we should not read *Lenz* through the prism of the German idealist aesthetics of Hegel and Schelling, especially their implicit claim that all art is concerned with beauty as the appearance of spiritual truth in sensuous form and can therefore be approached via a critical vocabulary more appropriate to the visual and plastic arts than to realist narrative. This last point is especially relevant because the reception of visual art and its dramatic effect on the protagonist are central themes in *Lenz*.

The passage known as the *Kunstgespräch* is the conversation in Pastor Oberlin's presbytery at Waldersbach between Büchner's character Lenz and the visitor Kaufmann about the representation of reality in art.¹ It is immediately preceded by a description of the church service at which Lenz has been invited to preach, bringing him both a brief emotional release from his mental distress and a moment of lucidity which foreshadows the intellectual exchange that takes place in the *Kunstgespräch* itself (*MA*, p. 142). The church service is a

¹ *MA*, pp. 144-46. *TMW*, pp. 90-92.

key moment in the text because it both represents and expresses a meaningful connection to the suffering of others which is otherwise lacking in Lenz's experience:

Ein süßes Gefühl menschlichen Wohls beschlich ihn...sie litten alle mit ihm, und es war ihm ein Trost, wenn er über einige müdgeweinte Augen Schlaf, und gequälten Herzen Ruhe bringen, wenn er über dieses von materiellen Bedürfnissen gequälte Sein, diese dumpfe Leiden gen Himmel leiten konnte.²

The key word here is *litten*. Suffering here is the touchstone of reality in Lenz's experience: the only thing which makes his experience both significant and real. Both the theological and the existential meaning of this idea are manifest in the hymn which the congregation sings together with Lenz:

Laß in mir die heil'gen Schmerzen,
Tiefe Bronnen ganz aufbrechen;
Leiden sei all' mein Gewinnst,
Leiden sei mein Gottesdienst³

The presence of the word *Leiden* in a pietist hymn by Christian Friedrich Richter (1676-1711) clearly suggests that human suffering is linked to the sufferings of Christ, and that the experience of that connection can be a source of redemption. Lenz is said both to be connected to the sufferings of the people when he preaches - 'sie litten alle mit ihm' - and yet after hearing the words of the hymn to be more than ever conscious of his own alienation: 'Er ging auf sein einsames Zimmer...er war allein, allein...er fühlte tiefen unnennbaren Schmerz

² *MA*, p. 142. 'A sweet feeling of endless well-being crept over him. They all suffered with him, and it was a comfort to him when he could bring sleep to several eyes tired from crying, bring peace to tortured hearts, direct towards Heaven this existence tormented by material needs, these weighty afflictions' (*TMW*, p. 89).

³ *MA*, p. 142. 'Burst, O divine woe / The floodgates of my soul; / May pain be my reward, / Through pain I love my lord' (*TMW*, p. 89).

davon...er konnte kein Ende finden der Wollust; endlich dämmerte es in ihm, er empfand ein leises tiefes Mitleid mit sich selbst.’⁴

His experience is both of pain beyond articulation (‘er fühlte tiefen unnennbaren Schmerz davon’) and yet also one of blissful reconciliation to himself (‘er konnte kein Ende finden der Wollust... er empfand ein leises tiefes Mitleid mit sich selbst’). To be alone in this sense is to suffer but not to be alienated, because Lenz is enabled precisely by the acceptance of his suffering to connect himself to the common suffering of humankind. The point is that suffering, although negative in itself, can confer ontological and therefore theological meaning through the connection it makes possible with others and with God.

This perception is the precondition for Lenz’s participation in the *Kunstgespräch*. His sense of the value and significance of reality is now articulated in aesthetic terms, but crucially it is also expressed in terms of the primacy of ontology over aesthetic judgement:

Die Dichter, von denen man sage, sie geben die Wirklichkeit, hätten auch keine Ahnung davon, doch seien sie immer noch erträglicher, als die, welche die Wirklichkeit verklären wollten...Ich verlange in allem Leben, Möglichkeit des Daseins, und dann ist’s gut; wir haben dann nicht zu fragen, ob es schön, ob es häßlich ist, das Gefühl, daß Was geschaffen sei, Leben habe, stehe über diesen Beiden, und sei das einzige Kriterium in Kunstsachen.⁵

For Lenz, this position represents a radical rejection of aesthetic idealism (‘Dieser Idealismus ist die schändlichste Verachtung der menschlichen Natur’, ‘This idealism is the most

⁴ *MA*, p. 142. ‘He went up to his lonely room. He was alone, alone! ... He felt deep, inexpressible grief because of it.... He could find no end to this ecstasy. Finally his mind cleared, he felt a quiet deep pity for himself’ (*TMW*, p. 89).

⁵ *MA*, p. 144. ‘The poets who supposedly give us reality actually have no idea of it, yet they are still more bearable than those who wish to transfigure it. ... In all I demand – life, the possibility of existence, and then all is well; we must not ask whether it is beautiful or ugly, the feeling that the work of art has life, stands above these two qualities and is the sole criterion of art’ (*TMW*, pp. 90-91).

disgraceful mockery of human nature' (*MA*, p. 144, *TMW*, p. 91). However, it is underwritten by what seems like an unequivocal affirmation of God's real presence as the precondition for realism in art: 'Er sagte: Der liebe Gott hat die Welt wohl gemacht sie wie sein soll, und wir können wohl nicht was Besseres klecksen, unser einziges Bestreben soll sein, ihm ein wenig nachzuschaffen.'⁶

This statement by Büchner's character Lenz appears directly to echo George Steiner's formulation of the inescapable connection between *Logos* and word, and the idea of art as the 'saying of Being' which follows from it.⁷ But of course Lenz's affirmation is one utterance by a fictional character at a particular point in a fictional text. That Büchner's character *says* this cannot therefore bear out the contention that Büchner's text as a whole exemplifies Steiner's view of literature as a vehicle of real presence. Indeed, the abstract formulation of such a position by a character within a literary text might seem to contradict Steiner's thesis that literary representation itself can be understood in terms of an aesthetic of incarnation. How then can we read Büchner's text today in the light of the question which Steiner poses?

First, we have to read the *Kunstgespräch* as an episode in the context of Büchner's narration as a whole. It is clear that the words on suffering he hears in the singing of the pietist hymn - whether or not he actually sings them - lead him to experience a kind of actively apprehended passivity (the biblical word 'passion' is strikingly apt) in which the Gospel narrative of the sufferings of Christ is incorporated into, and so becomes the expression of,

⁶ *MA*, p. 144. 'He said: The Good Lord has certainly made the world as it should be, and we surely cannot scrawl out anything better, our only goal should be to imitate Him a little' (*TMW*, p. 90).

⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences. Is There Anything In What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 3.

his own being: 'Das Drängen in ihm, die Musik, der Schmerz, erschütterte ihn. Das All war für ihn in Wunden ...'.⁸

What matters to him is the oneness of spiritual truth with its mode of expression. Lenz is what Steiner calls, on the analogy of dramatic or musical performance, 'an executant, one who acts out the material before him so as to give it intelligible life' (*RP*, p. 7). This is reflected in the content of the conversation which follows. What Büchner's character Lenz, like George Steiner, rejects, is secondary commentary in excess of his primary experience of art. What he seeks is the direct embodiment of immediate experience in the medium of art, not a reflective experience in excess of that medium: 'Der Dichter und Bildende ist mir der Liebste, der mir die Natur am Wirklichsten gibt, so daß ich über sein Gebild fühle, Alles Übrige stört mich.'⁹

It is crucial that Lenz's remark is prompted by his response to painting, here the still life and domestic interiors of the Dutch masters, and especially the two paintings of Christ greeting the disciples on the road to Emmaus and of a village woman, unable to go to church, worshipping at home whilst the church is visible in the distance.¹⁰ Lenz is said to have forgotten himself ('Er hatte sich ganz vergessen' (*MA*, p. 146, cf. *TMW*, p. 92)) in the course of the conversation, because that is the effect which the paintings have had on him. An emphasis on painting and the plastic arts as the silent and sensuous embodiment of spiritual truth is central to the aesthetic of German idealism, which has remarkably little (especially little positive) to say about realist narration. For Hegel and Schelling especially, art is the

⁸ *MA*, p. 142. 'The urge in him, the music, the pain, shattered him. For him there were wounds in the universe' (*TMW*, p. 89).

⁹ *MA*, p. 145. 'I most prefer the poet or painter who makes nature most real to me, so that I respond emotionally to his portrayal, everything else disturbs me' (*TMW*, p. 92).

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the possible sources of the *Kunstgespräch*, see Paul Requadt, *Bildlichkeit der Dichtung. Aufsätze zur deutschen Literatur vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert*. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1974), pp.108-112).

vehicle of an ideal truth which can also, in another but closely related way, be articulated in theological terms.¹¹ In this paradigm, realist narrative can coherently be described as an inferior form, because the *immediate* embodiment of meaning in form - and therefore in the aesthetic experience of the reader - can occur only intermittently in a realist narrative. Narrative realism (as Hegel famously argued in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Ästhetik*) is less concerned with the embodiment of truth *in* experience than with that self-conscious reflection *about* experience which, Hegel argues, is characteristic of the modern post-romantic world.¹² There is however a crucial ambivalence in Hegel's account of 'realism' in both literature and art. Hegel's account of narrative realism is brief and peripheral in relation to his philosophical aesthetics, which defines aesthetic truth as immediate presence in a sensuous medium, not as representation or interpretation through the written word.¹³ However, whilst rejecting as unworthy of serious literary treatment the objects presented to narrative realism by the modern world, he also comments approvingly on the breadth of subject matter which modern 'realism', especially in the paintings of the Dutch masters that Büchner's character Lenz also admires, can encompass.¹⁴ Hegel's rejection of narrative realism as a mode of representation reflects his rejection of the alienated subjectivity – the divorce between the inner life and outward social experience – that he regards as characteristic of modern culture. His dismissal of the modern novel is really a denial that the characteristic form of the novel in the German-speaking world – the romantic *Bildungsroman* – can be an adequate representation of modernity.¹⁵ Hegel's apparently

¹¹ See G.W.F.Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Ästhetik*, 3 vols, in Hegel, *Werke*, 20 vols, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Michels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 13, 127-131; F.W.J Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, in Schelling, *Werke*, 12 vols, ed. by Manfred Schröter (Munich: C.H.Beck, 1958), 3, 393-407 ('Konstruktion der Kunst überhaupt und im Allgemeinen').

¹² Hegel, *Werke* (as in fn. 11), 13, 23-25..

¹³ Hegel, *Werke* (as in fn. 11), 13, 17-19.

¹⁴ Hegel, *Werke* (as in fn. 11), 14, 237-38.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Werke* (as in fn. 11), 14, 219-20.

negative judgement of narrative realism reflects his judgement that the *romantic* form of art, and the cultural world which it once expressed, has come to an end. The kind of ‘realism’ which might represent the new - that is to say, the ‘modern’ – world is less rejected than simply absent from Hegel’s philosophical aesthetics.

Büchner’s text as a whole, unlike German idealist aesthetics, does not suggest the superiority of the visual arts over narrative realism. I want to suggest that it is precisely Büchner’s narrative rendering of the difference between aesthetic and theological truth which enables us to read his text, taken as a whole but focusing specifically on the *Kunstgespräch*, as a mode of what Steiner calls real presence.

What happens after the *Kunstgespräch* is as important as what comes before. The remainder of Büchner’s narrative provides no further instance of the mental lucidity which Lenz briefly enjoys during the *Kunstgespräch*, or of the real experience of spiritual wholeness occasioned by his hearing of the words of the hymn sung at Waldersbach. Rather, it chronicles the descent of his personality into a condition of irrevocable mental alienation. After the *Kunstgespräch* Lenz reverts to a state in which his condition is not one of *mitleiden* or *Mitleid* (compassion) at all. He suffers neither at one with himself nor together with others, but as a result of his alienation from both. His isolation now betokens not the difference or the intensity of his ability to feel, but his incapacity to do so: ‘Je leerer, je kälter, je sterbender er sich innerlich fühlte, desto mehr drängte es in ihm, eine Glut in sich zu wecken, es kamen ihm Erinnerungen an die Zeiten, wo Alles in ihm sich drängte, wo er unter all’ seinen Empfindungen keuchte; und jetzt so tot’.¹⁶

¹⁶ *MA*, p. 150. ‘The emptier, the colder, the deader he felt inwardly, the more he felt urged to ignite a blaze within himself, he remembered the times when everything seethed within him, when he panted under the weight of all his sensations; and now so dead’ (*TMW*, p. 96).

This is the context of the most important event in the subsequent narrative: Lenz's failed attempt to resuscitate a child who has died in the neighbourhood of Fouday, in which he invokes the words of Christ in the Gospel: 'Arise and walk', 'Steh auf und wandle!' (*TMW*, p. 96 *MA*, p. 151). After this episode the Christian symbolism and vocabulary which briefly – immediately before the *Kunstgespräch* – had become a vehicle of creative self-awareness for Lenz, now becomes the opposite: the language and the symbol of his mental disease: 'Es war ihm, als könne er eine ungeheure Faust hinauf in den Himmel ballen und Gott herbei reißen und zwischen seinen Wolken schleifen; als könnte er die Welt mit den Zähnen zermalmen und sie dem Schöpfer in's Gesicht speien; er schwur, er lästerte.'¹⁷

In his words to Oberlin after this experience Lenz evokes that 'Langeweile', 'boredom' which Schopenhauer will later diagnose as a total dissociation of consciousness from creative action.¹⁸ However, unlike in Schopenhauer's philosophy,¹⁹ there is no suggestion at all that this condition can be mitigated by art, and specifically none that art might be able to absorb the alienated consciousness into an aesthetic object and so enable it to feel creative empathy: that self-forgetfulness which Lenz was once able to feel before the paintings of the Dutch masters. For Lenz now, 'Langeweile' makes empathy and therefore its aesthetic expression redundant: 'Ja Herr Pfarrer, sehen Sie, die Langeweile! Die Langeweile! o! so langweilig, ich weiß gar nicht mehr, was ich sagen soll, ich habe schon alle Figuren an die Wand gezeichnet.'²⁰

¹⁷ *MA*, p. 151. 'He felt as if he could thrust a gigantic fist up into Heaven, and tear God down and drag Him through his clouds; as if he could grind up the world in his teeth and spit it into the Creator's face; he swore, he blasphemed' (*TMW*, pp. 96-97).

¹⁸ Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 16 vols, ed. by Paul Deussen (Munich: Piper, 1911), 1, 468-476.

¹⁹ Schopenhauer, *Werke* (as in fn. 18), 1, 312-316; 2, 461-466 (Über das innere Wesen der Kunst').

²⁰ *MA*, p. 153. 'Yes, pastor, you see, boredom! Boredom! Oh! so boring, I no longer know what to say, I've already drawn all sorts of figures on the wall' (*TMW*, p. 98).

However, it is precisely at this point that Lenz becomes an artist himself. Immediately after this passage comes the second occasion on which the words of a hymn-like text occur in the Novella, and they form a counterpoint to those which Lenz hears sung in church just before the *Kunstgespräch*. But the later words are not part of any existing hymn or poem at all; they are composed by Lenz himself:

O Gott in Deines Lichtes Welle,
In Deines glühenden Mittags Helle
Sind meine Augen wund gemacht
Wird es denn niemals wieder Nacht?²¹

These words too refer to suffering and to God, but they evoke less the meaning of suffering than a desperate plea for its extinction through the annihilation of consciousness itself.²²

Lenz tells Oberlin, as he tells the reader, that his suffering is now “unreal” and therefore irredeemable for him because it can never be represented to or by the sufferer and so become real (‘ich habe schon alle Figuren an die Wand gezeichnet’, ‘I’ve already drawn all sorts of figures on the wall’). Yet Büchner’s text, through his character’s portrayal, makes it real *for us*. As Hermann Pongs showed,²³ a similar “rewriting” of the same pietist hymn occurs in

²¹ *MA*, p. 153. ‘Oh God, Thy waves of radiant light, / Thy glowing midday shining bright, / Have made my wakeful eyes so sore, / Will not the night come evermore?’ (*TMW*, p. 98).

²² Wolfgang Wittkowski has persuasively argued that the real tragedy of Lenz’s attempt to compose a continuation of the hymn consists, not in the degree of his suffering, but in his attempt to avoid it. See Wittkowski, *Georg Büchner. Persönlichkeit, Weltbild, Werk* (Heidelberg: Karl Winter, 1978), p. 361: ‘Der Schmerz wird hier dem Licht Gottes selber zugeschrieben: Die menschliche Natur kann es nicht ertragen und flieht davor’. ‘Here pain is attributed to the light of God himself. Human Nature cannot bear it and runs away from it.’

²³ Hermann Pongs, *Symbol als Mitte*, (Marburg: N.G.Elwert, 1978), p. 87.

Büchner's *Woyzeck*, where it is attributed to the character Woyzeck before he sets out to murder Marie:

Leiden sei all mein Gewinnst,
Leiden sei mein Gottesdienst,
Herr wie dein Leib war rot und wund,
So lass mein Herz sein aller Stund.²⁴

However, unlike the second couplet in *Woyzeck*, in which Büchner's character symbolically prefigures his own death in the language and imagery of the crucifixion narrative, the second hymn-like passage composed by Lenz deliberately negates the words of the hymn which first appear before the *Kunstgespräch*. Yet Büchner's character Lenz is indeed an exponent and interpreter of the original text. Lenz 'interprets' the original in the sense which George Steiner gives to the idea of hermeneutics 'as defining the enactment of answerable understanding, of active apprehension' (*RP*, p. 7). The achievement of Büchner's original composition, expressed in the words of his fictional character, is to articulate the experience of a particular human self as part of a received narrative of incarnation.

What, then, of real presence in Büchner's *Lenz*? Büchner's text does indeed bear out Steiner's thesis, but in a sense very different from the identification of the theological and aesthetic modes of truth which German Idealist aesthetics proposes, and which Büchner's character Lenz briefly experiences in his response to the paintings of the Dutch masters and the peasant scenes of the Vosges. This is the position to which Lenz appears briefly to assent in his statement that the task of art is to imitate the perfection of Divine Creation. Büchner's realism allows his character to say this ('Der liebe Gott hat die Welt wohl gemacht wie sie seyn

²⁴ *MA*, p. 250. 'May pain be my reward, / Through pain I love my Lord / Lord, like thy body, red and sore, / So be my heart for evermore.' (*TMW*, p. 150).

soll...’, ‘The Good Lord has certainly made the world as it should be...’) at a particular point in his text. But his text as a whole shows this notional belief to be utterly at odds with what is most real in his character’s actual experience: the reality of human suffering. That reality can be neither mitigated nor overcome, although it can perhaps fleetingly be transcended, by the experience of art. The achievement of Büchner’s realism is to show us *this*. In the sequel to the *Kunstgespräch* what Steiner calls ‘the covenant between word and world’ (*RP*, p. 93) breaks down completely. With the exception of his composing verses which echo the Waldersbach hymn but radically change its import, Lenz descends into an almost catatonic state. His utterances after the second hymn-like sequence reveal only his mental alienation, and are marked by that obsessive repeating of particular words and phrases which characterises schizophrenic illness: ‘Im Gespräch stockte er oft, eine unbeschreibliche Angst befahl ihn, er hatte das Ende seines Satzes verloren; dann meinte er, er müsse das zuletzt gesprochene Wort behalten und immer sprechen, nur mit großer Anstrengung unterdrückte er diese Gelüste.’²⁵

In Büchner’s *Lenz* the ‘break in the covenant between word and world’ goes deeper than this crisis of verbal representation. The real theme of Büchner’s *Lenz* is not the representation of experience in words. The ideal of Büchner’s character Lenz is a form of art which enables its recipients to forget themselves because their consciousness is entirely absorbed in the work of art itself. It is precisely for this reason that the *Kunstgespräch* is chiefly about the visual and plastic arts which are concerned less with representation than with embodiment. However, Büchner’s narrative realism is also centrally concerned with the distance between this kind of aesthetic embodiment, so central to German idealist aesthetics, and the alienated self-consciousness which desperately plagues its protagonist. It is precisely this distance –

²⁵ *MA*, p. 155. ‘He often stammered in conversation, an indescribable fear came over him, he had lost the end of his sentence; then he thought he ought to hold on to the last word spoken and keep repeating it, only with great effort did he suppress these desires.’ (*TMW*, p. 100).

the difference between aesthetic embodiment and that incarnation which is the real presence of truth in experience - which is represented in Büchner's text. That distance can never be bridged. However, it can be made articulate and so the object of his readers' empathy by the intrinsically representational and verbal art of realist narrative. The real theme of Büchner's *Lenz* is not the crisis of representation – the break in the covenant between word and world – but a crisis in lived experience which is defined but never attenuated by the idea of incarnation: a break in the covenant between words and the Word. That crisis, Büchner's text shows us, can never be reversed or overcome by any aesthetic achievement. That is because, in the Judeo-Christian tradition from which Büchner's text ultimately springs, the idea of incarnation is associated with silence at least as much as it is with articulate form. Büchner's *Lenz* is heir to that tradition as well as exemplifying the European tradition of narrative realism which, as Erich Auerbach showed, ultimately derives from it.²⁶ However, Büchner's text also exemplifies the creative tension between the two traditions which the German mode of realist narrative especially brings to expression.

That tension closely parallels a disjunction between the aesthetic mode of representation in Büchner's work and the ontological vision which informs it. As John Reddick especially has shown²⁷, Büchner's work as a whole – his natural scientific researches, his dramatic and narrative works as much as his political vision of a free and humane society – is underscored by a persistent opposition between a vision of the human and natural world as a meaningful whole, and an immediate existential awareness of the incoherence, indeed the inarticulate pain, of actual experience. Sometimes the holistic vision is articulated in both philosophical and aesthetic terms as in Büchner's 'Trial Lecture' ('Probevorlesung') 'On the Nerves of the Skull' ('Über Schädelnerven') delivered in Zürich in 1836 (MA. p. 257-269). There Büchner

²⁶ See Erich Auerbach, 'Sacrae scripturae sermo humilis', in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1967), pp. 21-27.

²⁷ See John Reddick, *Georg Büchner. The Shattered Whole* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 21-28.

opposes to the ‘teleological’ (‘teleologisch’) or mechanical view of nature associated with France the ‘philosophical’ (‘philosophisch’) view of his own associated with the ‘Naturphilosophie’ (‘philosophy of nature’) inherited from German idealism. Where the teleological view explains the whole of organic life in terms of its fitness for purpose, the philosophical perspective considers each and every living being and its parts as meaningful in themselves: ‘Alles, was ist, ist um seiner selbst willen da’ (‘everything which is exists for its own sake’) (MA, p. 260). The purpose of the philosophical investigation of nature is to discern the very law of Being conceived in this sense, which for Büchner is also ‘a law of beauty’ (‘[ein] Gesetz der Schönheit’, MA, p. 260). Büchner significantly adds that the scientific bridge between this vision and actual phenomena has yet to be built: ‘Daß es bis jetzt gelungen sei, zwischen letzterem und dem Naturleben, das wir unmittelbar wahrnehmen, eine Brücke zu schlagen, muß die Kritik verneinen’ (MA, p. 260). Büchner’s ‘philosophische Ansicht’ (‘philosophical view’) of nature is less a theory than a perspective: a way of seeing motivated as much by ontological as by ‘scientific’ criteria and soon destined empirically to be refuted by the Darwinian theory of evolution.

However, in Büchner’s work as a whole the real ‘refutation of idealism’ is by human experience, not by scientific facts. That *experience* is always Büchner’s central concern. From this perspective, the philosophical affirmation is as necessary, and as meaningful, as the existential truth which negates it. For Büchner’s creative insight can never be reduced to a single, let alone a seamless, vision of human experience. On the speculative level of his Trial Lecture Büchner’s philosophical vision is indeed also an aesthetic one. Yet his dramatic and narrative work uses all the resources of language and representation to highlight the distance between the aesthetic vision and the reality of human experience. In *Woyzeck* Büchner’s inarticulate leading character is tormented by a doctor who expounds a pastiche of quasi-Hegelian moralism ‘in dem Menschen verklärt sich die Individualität zur Freiheit’: (‘in

humanity individuality transfigures itself into freedom') (MA, p. 242) that affirms human freedom from natural causes whilst reducing his patient to the level of an animal or a thing: 'Woyzeck er hat die schönste aberratio mentalis partialis[...] sehr schön ausgeprägt' ('Woyzeck you have a perfect form of partial mental aberration, beautifully expressed') (MA, p. 243). The point is not the content of the doctor's philosophy (he seems closer to a German philosopher than a French materialist) but the degrading human effect it has on his patient.

For Büchner, the real presence of truth in our experience and therefore in our language is neither aesthetic nor philosophical, but existential in kind. Indeed, his greatest *aesthetic* achievement – which in Lenz is one of narrative realism *par excellence* – is to make manifest the distance between the two kinds of truth. In Büchner's work, the break in the covenant between words and the Word predates the moment of modernity which Steiner defines; but it remains profoundly relevant to Steiner's theme. Büchner's text is unthinkable without the intellectual and spiritual vocabulary of Christian doctrine, especially the emphasis on the centrality of suffering and the religious meaning of ordinary experience which the German Protestant and pietist tradition particularly defines.²⁸ However, the concern of Büchner's *Lenz* with the real presence of truth is also inseparable from its specifically literary realism. Büchner's *Lenz* is supremely about the tension between human self-consciousness and the quest for wholeness of experience. It is about the irreversible difference between its central character's consciousness of himself and his consciousness of others and the material world. For all the power of its evocation of the experience of a particular self, *Lenz* also contains a plurality of narrative perspectives which show his character Lenz's experience in relation to,

²⁸ On this point see Wolfgang Wittkowski, *Georg Büchner* (as in fn. 22, pp. 357-366 and *Georg Büchner. Rückblick und Einblick* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 147-158 ('Die Philosophen und der Pietismus. Ethik und ethische Interpretation'). See also Erwin Kobel, *Georg Büchner. Das dichterische Werk* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1974), pp. 151-158.

and yet alienated from, the experience of other selves and therefore the truth of the human world.

These are precisely the qualities which led German idealist aesthetics to judge modern narrative realism as inadequate to the task of art as a medium of truth in the modern world. But they are also the qualities which make it appropriate to describe Büchner's *Lenz* as a locus of real presence. For this text is not about the idea of incarnation, but its reality: the truth that ultimate meaning can be apprehended only in the particular and private – because incarnate – reality of human selfhood. That truth is indeed really present in Büchner's text, because what we call his realism makes it real.